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ABSTRACT

It is difficult to give a precise meaning to the term "concept" because to specify any sense to the term is already to be using concepts. It is impossible to talk about concepts without at the same time having made epistemological and metaphysical commitments. If the epistemological and metaphysical commitments are inadequate, then the sense given to concepts will also suffer such fault. Concepts will be systematically misunderstood and will give a distorted view of reality. Some areas of psychology, social science, and philosophy suffer from faults in the form of knowledge they have adopted. Hegel (1966) argues powerfully for the view that all theories or points of view must be examined in terms of how successfully they are able to achieve knowledge of their objects. Real knowledge will be arrived at, not by holding to one viewpoint in opposition to the other views, but by working through points of view to see how they contribute to our understanding of human thought. Psychology should recuperate its past and set to a serious study and evaluation of Hegel's thought, his views on methods, conceptualization, thinking, and experience. Hegel's demand is that any form of knowledge be able to say what it knows in a way that does not contradict its own standard. This involves the detailed description of each form of knowledge on its own terms. This is the path to Science. (NRB)

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ON THE NATURE OF CONCEPTS

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ON THE NATURE OF CONCEPTS

L.E. NINNES

Introduction

Concepts are the currency of consciousness. To be conscious is to be conscious of something. To restate one of the phenomenologists slogans: consciousness is always consciousness of something.

Now this consciousness of something is a determination of thought. We make it. And by making such determinations - by thinking - we elaborate our world.

However today it seems as if we can get along without consciousness. We can employ concepts as though they were simple objects, symbols. And we can view the mind as a 'symbol-manipulating system' (Boden, 1981, p.33). It is the contention of this paper that concepts are not just symbols and thinking is not just a process of shuffling symbols around.

The term concept has certainly had a chequered career. It has been variously conceived as a pure thought item, either innately present or produced by some external stimulus. It has been conceived as a product of God's activity; as a subjective item that gives form to the world; as an objective item that exists in an ideal realm; as a bit of information; as a neurological correlate; as a symbol etc.....

The difficulty in giving a precise meaning to this term is due to the fact that to specify any sense to the term concept is already to be using concepts.(1) And by using concepts we are eo ipso employing what has been called a form of knowledge. This form of knowledge involves epistemological and metaphysical commitments. It is impossible to talk about concepts

(1) "The term 'concept' is thus essentially a dummy expression or variable, whose meaning is assignable only in the context of a theory, and cannot be independently ascertained." (Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Vol.1, p.178)

without at the same time having made epistemological and metaphysical commitments.

Currency has to be recognised as such. It is context dependent. Out with the context is ceases to be currency - it is meaningless.

Now, if the epistemological and metaphysical commitments are inadequate, then the sense given to concepts will also suffer such fault. That is, they will be systematically misunderstood, they will give us a distorted view of reality.

Let us deal briefly with an example. Boden specifies the computational point of view as follows:

> "The essence of the computational viewpoint is that at least some and perhaps all aspects of the mind can be fruitfully described for theoretical purposes by using computational concepts." (Boden, 1980, p.129)

But what are computational concepts and do computers possess them? Boden clarifies....

> "Computers....manipulate symbols. A symbol is an inherently meaningless cipher that becomes meaningful by having meaning assigned to it by a user, who thereafter interprets it in a particular way." (Boden, 1977, p.15)

This passage suggests that the subject who has the computational concepts is the user, the programmer. The machine, or computer does not have concepts at all.

> "It is up to the programmer to decide what interpretations can sensibly (that is, consistently) be put on the inherently meaningless ciphers of machine and programming languages." (Boden, 1977, p.16)

Yet on the computational viewpoint it is the computer that understands or fails to understand such a language. It is the computer that is credited with intelligence, or stupidity. But how can it be either if what it is dealing with, or manipulating, is inherently meaningless - it doesn't know what currency it is dealing with? Boden defines intelligence as "the ability

creatively to manipulate symbols" (1977, p.19). It would seem that this definition of intelligence is not what is normally understood by the concept.

And further does it make sense to refer to the computer as a subject capable of even subtending such relationships, of being the subject of its own behaviour?

It is here that we begin to feel an epistemological strain. It is here that we are introduced to an ontological imposter. But it is necessary to investigate this form of knowledge on its own terms to see if it can meet its own criterion of what counts as knowledge. For it is based on certain assumptions concerning the nature of concepts and that of human thinking. If it can be shown that in its development it denies the very object it seeks to comprehend - human thinking and its currency - then it will have provided another step in the education of ourselves concerning the nature of our reality. Though perhaps not adequate to its task, it will have provided us with certain truths that we will retain, i.e. that we cannot fruitfully describe the mind with concepts that refuse to recognise its existence; that we cannot elucidate the nature of concepts, seen as determinations - of - thought, using computational concepts which are for the computer inherently meaningless.

Our concern will be to show that Hegel had developed this argument concerning adequacy some time ago, and that psychology, and the social sciences generally, could benefit greatly from implementing it.

But this concern with viewpoints and the way they can understand or misunderstand their objects has been made by many thinkers. Koch, for instance, sees much contemporary psychology as misconceived, reducing man to something else. He argues for a threefold division of theories: "Some that are ontologically distorting, some that are ontologically respecting and some that are ontologically revealing." (Koch, 1980, p.50)

Koch bases this division on the way each type of theory deals with..."the network of natural language bearing on its domain". (1980, p.50)

This is an important point to make concerning theories or conceptual frameworks. But Koch stops too soon in the process of justifying a theory. He makes the touchstone of adequacy rest on natural language knowledge, as though this latter were transparent to thought. But natural language knowledge is a form of knowledge and must itself be asked the same questions that we put to the more developed forms of knowledge, viz. how adequate is its knowledge? How well do concepts grasp the object before it? What are the epistemological and metaphysical assumptions or presuppositions that are embedded in it? Koch provides no answer to these questions.

One reason for this failure to deal with the basis of knowledge is due to the fact that concepts have been dealt with in a purely logical manner. Time and again thinkers take great pains to point out the variety of views as to the nature of concepts, but this variety is always within the logical/analytic framework. Let me give an example. Norreklit, in his Concepts: Their Nature and Significance for Metaphysics and Epistemology, states his intention as follows:

> "The prime intention has been to present a satisfactory account of the nature of concepts, because it is in the light of this nature that any metaphysical and epistemological consequences must be seen." (p.11)

This is indeed a laudable intention, which one page later is conditioned by the following: "only the works of analytic philosophers have been discussed".(p.12) No attempt is made to justify such a condition. No attempt is made to deal with the arguments that have previously been advanced by other thinkers against such a stance. This makes such a point of view dogmatic and arbitrary.

Another reason for the failure to deal with the basis of knowledge has been the conscious decision to ignore such questions - the implication being

that they are not relevant to the 'science' being developed. Barr and Feigenbaum exemplify this attitude. They admit that there is a problem concerning how we describe computer systems that can do certain activities which, when done by humans, are said to indicate intelligence. Can a computer system that performs the activities be said to know or understand anything? They then reply as follows: "There is an important philosophical point here that we will sidestep" and a few sentences further on, "...we shall avoid it here by describing the behaviours as intelligent and not concern outselves with how to describe the machines that produce them. Many intelligent activities besides numerical calculation and information retrieval have been accomplished by programmes." (1981, p.7)

But this 'important philosophical point' cannot be sidestepped. For the sense given to the concepts like 'intelligence' and 'know' is determined by how we have resolved this prior philosophical point. If it has been shown that the nature of these concepts is something that requires as an integral part that illusive commodity called consciousness, then we will simply be legislating a counterfeit currenty to utilize such concepts in the artificial intelligence framework which excludes consciousness.

So, it would seem that the most appropriate course of action would be to begin by examining which theory will provide an unbiased and complete point of view. But at this stage we ourselves have no standard by which to evaluate such theories. We seem to have reached an epistemological impasse.

Concepts, Logic and Dialectic

Concepts are the currency of consciousness. To think is to think about something. In this relationship we have two distinguishable aspects; our consciousness of something, and the thing we are conscious of.

Traditionally we can call the former the concept of the thing, i.e. our

knowledge of the thing, and the latter is the real thing we are attempting to adequately conceptualise.

There are at least two possible ways in which this relationship can be conceived:

1. A concept is in some sense a reflection, resemblance, representation, copy, result, image, idea, impression; in my mind, consciousness, thought self, of an external, real, objective material thing. On this view a concept tends to be seen, as a result of a one way process - from external to internal; as causal in nature and as producing concepts that are discrete, static, and abstract. Truth is correspondence of concept and thing. This manner of conceiving the relationship is dualistic and logical.

2. A concept is in some sense both our knowledge of the thing and the thing itself. They are a unity of opposites and self developing, dynamic. Concepts are here understood as determinations of thought, but thought is not seen as subjective, individual nor external to the thing. The development of concepts is the concretization of the world, and it is the process called experience. Truth is the whole, or the interrelatedness of concepts. This manner of conceiving the relationship is monistic and dialectical.(1)

Koch seems to be suggesting a point of view in line with this second view when he says:

> "A definition tags and preserves the discrimination of something within the world flux - however embedded or intricately contoured that something may be. Moreover, what is tagged is no more stable than the discriminal activities and powers of appliers of the term." (1980, p.46)

(1) A corollary of this second view is that it is pointless to try and understand the nature of our world (which is part and parcel of our concepts) in terms of artifacts or non-human animals.

This suggests that objects are not given in themselves but are only objects under certain concepts - they are as we experience them. Change your concept of the object and you change the object. For the object is only in such wise as we know it. Leeper's old lady/young lady picture shows how one's conception can influence what is seen. But every concept illustrates a development as does every object. Illness is today a different thing from what it was centuries ago. Illness was the condition of being overcome by evil demons. That is what illness was, that was our conception of it then. Today we may view illness as the infection by viruses. It is these concepts that make up our notion of illness today. The concept of illness has developed, become more determinate. Illness is then better understood. But we cannot separate the object - illness - from the concepts we have of it. (It would then become indeterminate.)

Thus there is a sense in which it is meaningless to say that objects are there in the external world and have always been there, even before man. For either we say what we mean by object and hence determine it in relation to our particular historical consciousness or we are unable to say what it is that has always been present. Before experience there is nothing. Experience contains all - even the knowledge claim that objects exist independently of man.

It is this second view of concepts that has been little dealt with. Yet it is the contention of this paper that only this view allows for real progress in the understanding of thinking and its currency.

This view of concepts finds one of its clearest and most powerful expressions in Hegel's Phenomenology of Mind, what one writer has called "...a social psychology of the cognizing mind and its development" (Markova, 1982, p.103).

Indeed, apart from a few notable exceptions, it is only now that social

scientists are slowly starting to examine Hegel's thought. K.Marx certainly understood Hegel's view of concepts and saw the value of his arguments for the understanding of economics and for society itself. For Marx, a commodity is both a thing and a relationship, it is a social thing..."whose qualities are at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses" (1970, p.77). A commodity is, then, not a simple object nor an abstract concept, it is "...in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties" (1970, p.76).

And Jaspers certainly saw the immense contribution Hegel's thought could make to the understanding of psychopathology.

> "Dialectical transformation is a universal and basic form of thought, and is in contrast with rational understanding, which it uses and surpasses. It is indispensable for the understanding of the psyche and bestows a satisfactory quality of its own on our conception of human situations, human facts and movements." (1963, p.343)

Jaspers refers to Hegel's Phenomenology of Mind as "almost inexhaustible", and "...as going far beyond psychology though including it" (1963, p.343).

But these are two of the exceptions. In general Hegel's thought was either ignored or ridiculed. Part of the resistance to examining Hegel no doubt stems from his dialectical view which sees the analytic and logical point of view as limited. This latter point of view, intrinsic to what normally passes for science, and embodying the first view of concepts above is incapable of understanding the Hegelian arguments without vacating its point of view. So we just get the dogmatic reassertion of the laws of logic and the flat denial of Hegel's arguments without argument to substantiate such denial.(1)

This difficulty can be evidenced even in those who write on Hegel's work

(1) On Hegel's evaluation of the laws of logic, see my "Hegel on Pure Thought" (1983, p.25-37).

today. Inwood, in his recent massive work on Hegel is concerned to stress at the very outset that Hegel's thought is "obscure and equivocal", "ambiguous", "obscure and complex". It is "...a mistake to become wholly absorbed in Hegel's system". "...One should remain at a critical distance from it." (1983, p.3)

Hegel's simple reply would be, "from what point of view are you being critical, and how adequate is this view?" Inwood, in not justifying his own critical posture, is simply being dogmatic and arbitrary.

However, Hegel's importance for the understanding of consciousness and its currency has recently been pointed out by a series of thinkers, for example Markova in psychology, and Rose in sociology.

Markova argues that psychology has for too long been wedded to what she calls the Cartesian framework. The characteristics of this are fourfold.

"(1) The nature of mind is individualistic.
(2) The mind is static and passive in the acquisition of knowledge.
(3) Knowledge is acquired through algorithms.
(4) The criterion of knowledge is external." (1982, p.8)

For Markova, this framework is only applicable in those areas of psychology, "...in which all that is required of a person is the performance of a machine or computer, and to some aspects of psychophysiology and psychopharmacology" (1982, p.203). In all other areas Markova argues, it will be the Hegelian framework that is progressive.

Rose argues a similar line in Sociology. She sees modern sociological thought as dominated by a neo-Kantian paradigm, witness the sociology of Durkheim, Weber, Phenomenology, Marxism of the Frankfurt school and scientific sociology. Her concern is to show that, "Hegel's thought anticipates and criticises the whole neo-Kantian endeavour, its methodologism and its moralism, and consists of a wholly different mode of social analysis." (1981, p.2).

It is our view that Markova's Cartesian framework and Rose's Kantian framework, which they counterpose to the Hegelian, both amount to the same point of view (though further consideration of this lies outwith our current concern). They both involve the first view of concepts outlined above.

One further observation seems relevant here. It seems that for some time psychology (and social science generally) has forgotten its history. Koch argues this (1980) and psychology exemplifies it. Together with this there seems to have been an analytic, linguistic philosophy in pure isolation from psychology, and a non-reflective empirical psychology, uninterested in its philosophical foundation. For example, only in December 1983 did the British Psychological Society include as one of its specialist sections, History and Philosophy of Psychology. The Hegelian view demands that a form of knowledge shows the necessity of its point of view. This requires the detailed description of how it arose out of, and superseded what went before. History and philosophy are thus essential.

Hegel on Thinking

Hegel's philosophy is marked by a total rejection of the dualist point of view underlying many previous accounts. His claim is that it is his philosophy that has successfully reconciled thought and being, subject and substance. To substantiate this claim Hegel argues that we need to exmine the whole corpus of human experience. It is by such an examination that we will arrive at a point of view that is adequate to the objects it seeks to know. Such a position Hegel calls Absolute Knowledge.

Hegel's Phenomenology of Mind is the education of ourselves from the level of natural existence up to the level of Hegelian Science. In following this process Hegel's concern is to describe each form of knowledge to see if it meets its own standards for claiming to know something. His description

reveals that each form of knowledge ends up contradicting its own criterion for what it claims to know, and through this contradiction is led to a more adequate form.

The significance of this, for the nature of concepts, is as follows. Concepts arise in a form of knowledge and only in a form of knowledge. Concepts are the attempt by consciousness to know the object it is conscious of. If the conception of the object contradicts the objet it is conscious of then consciousness seems bound to upgrade its concept (or knowledge) to be more congruent with the object at hand. But this object is only an object for that particular form of knowledge. So on the Hegelian view, there is a dynamic metastability of concept and object, of reality.

This argument of Hegel's is important. It is the argument for adequacy. This demand underlies many of the complaints concerning modern psychology. (Scriven, 1980, p.64 f.) Let us then go over in some detail Hegel's account of experience and how various forms of knowledge contained therein are self-contradictory.

"Consciousness knows and comprehends nothing but what falls within its experience." (Hegel, 1966, p.96) For Hegel, all knowledge is a product of experience - to be known is to be experienced. There are on this view no transcendent forms waiting outside experience to make it intelligible when it comes on the scene. There are not, for Hegel, two types of experience; real experience, where the subject receives sensations, and an ideal experience of the apriori ideal forms or logical forms separate from this real experience, by which such real experience is to be moulded. Before experience there is nothing (epistemological vacancy), for no determination has yet been made. There is then no subject, no object, no consciousness, no knowledge, no ideas, no discourse, no form, no content, no meaning, no reflection, no language and no concepts. There is indeterminacy, or lack of any form of relationship.

Still, experience does begin and there are things known. How?

> "Consciousness, we find, distinguishes from itself something, to which at the same time, it relates itself; or, to use the current expression, there is something for consciousness, and the determinate form of this process of relating, or of there being something for a consciousness, is knowledge." (Hegel, 1966, p.139)

It is when the immediacy or indeterminacy becomes mediated by consciousness distinguishing from itself its other that experience begins. So from this immediacy or indeterminacy we get division - the subject-object complex. The beginning is Reality as undetermined (or Spirit, as Hegel calls it). The moment of consciousness appears as the moment of distinction between consciousness and object. Consciousness distinguishes itself by distinguishing its other, and this other is for consciousness an immediate.

Consciousness then is,

> "on the one hand, consciousness of an object, on the other, consciousness of itself; consciousness of what to it is true; and consciousness of its knowledge of that truth. Since both are for the same consciousness it is itself their comparison." (Hegel, 1966, p.141)

We have in these three quotations the rudiments of Hegel's view of consciousness and its object. To be aware of anything is to have made a determination. It is to have set something in relation to what it is not - otherwise it could not be distinguished, and it is a cognitive relation. Experience is the process whereby consciousness examines itself to assess whether its certainty of what it is aware of, i.e. its knowledge, is adequate to the object of consciousness, i.e. its truth. Both these aspects - the object and the concept (or knowledge) - are for the same consciousness. It is then their comparison. We do not attempt to test whether our concept is in correspondence with some external reality, for if this latter is external to experience, then it is not a possible object for experience. Hegel's view of consciousness is radical. Consciousness is not trapped in the subjective, it is in the world. It exists only insofar as it is experiencing the world, and

the world exists only insofar as it is experienced. When we claim to know something, the standard we use to evaluate this claim is indwelling in consciousness. This does not mean that all knowledge must be subjective - consciousness does not simply reduce the object to a subjective correlate. It does not reduce material reality to a subjective idealist reality. Hegel's view of consciousness entails an objective idealism - where matter and mind are taken up and resolved in a unity which is both substantial and self-conscious. It is when we have reached a comprehensive understanding of the forms and interconnections of knowledge that we can attain to a truly scientific view. Here concepts are not one sided but are adequate to the reality they express - at this level reality is conceptual.

So for Hegel, experience is the process of consciousness examining itself - examining both its knowledge of the object and its own standard. Each successive collapse of a form of knowledge due to the contradiction between its knowledge and its object, gives rise to a new form of knowledge which contains the truths of that cancelled form. Each cancelled form provides us with certain truths that must be present in all succeeding forms - hence the value of the form and the necessity of considering all forms of knowledge. We are educated through the failure of each particular form of knowledge. We gain a more concrete determinate understanding of reality through this process.

Hegel traces the process through which we must pass if we seek to know truly - if we seek a scientific comprehension of the world. Each form must be examined on the basis of its own standard. For each form holds to the view that its concept be adequate to its object. So if the concept does not provide such an adequate view, consciousness develops it to bring it more into line with the object. But by changing its concept it also changes its object for the object only exists insofar as consciousness knows it. As Hyppolite comments, "The theory of knowledge is at the same time a theory of the object of knowledge." (1974, p.23)

Let us briefly look at the first form of knowledge that Hegel describes in his Phenomenology of Mind. Sense-certainty is the form of knowledge that claims to know the object in its immediacy and in its entirety. Here the object of the senses is presented to consciousness as unmediated by thought - it is the pure richness of sense. The standard that sense-certainty holds to is that the object can be known truly in its immediate apprehension by the senses. We do not conceptualize, we just apprehend.

Now if we claim to know something we must be able to say what it is that we know. So Hegel asks sense certainty to say what it knows. Sense certainty cannot reply that it knows "this rose" or "this rock" since such a description entails mediation. All it can reply with is "this". But "this" does not indicate the bare sensuous particular, for "this" is a universal. Further, if we enquire into the nature of the "this" we find it contains two further universals, "here" and "now". But these, as universals also, fail to indicate or describe the bare sensuous particular. Sense-certainty is then in the unhappy position of being unable to say, or communicate, what it knows. It is unable to describe its experience. When it attempts to state what it knows it contradicts its own claims as to the immediate nature of what it beholds. When it says what it apprehends it says the universal is its object.

This is the first of three developments of this form of knowledge. The second is where sense-certainty attempts to rectify the contradiction by seeking certainty of the immediate in the subject. It is because these apprehensions are mine that I am certain. But, very briefly, the same difficulty arises when sense-certainty is asked to say what the subject is. The reply, that it is "I" which apprehends the immediate, simply produces another universal which fails to describe the particular subject of this experience. All "I's" are equal. So, both from the object side and from the subject side, the experience of sense-certainty cannot be described.

Without continuing further in the development of sense-certainty, it is evident that the inability of sense-certainty to say what it knows is due to its inadequate form of knowledge.(1) By putting ourselves into the position of sense-certainty we are able to discover its own inner dialectic. This process immanent in sense-certainty entails a revision of the form of knowledge which Hegel calls perception. But sense-certainty is not entirely negative. We have learnt from the attempt by sense-certainty to know its object in an immediate fashion that such an attempt is futile. From now on all further forms of knowledge will know that knowledge is mediate.

Hegel claims that all particular forms of knowledge evince such a dialectical development, each one leading on to a more developed and adequate form. Together with this development, there is also a parallel development in the concepts being employed. For concepts are the currency of consciousness and consciousness is always embodied in a form of knowledge.

One way of summarising this would be to say that reality is itself developing through the process of experience - for both object and subject are involved in this dialectical process. This position is non-dualistic. Neither is it subjective, or purely objective. Further, the concepts employed are not atomistic or static. Concepts are seen as"fluid" and as interrelated, for they contain the activity of consciousnes and they are object determinations.

Hegel's description of the dialectic of sense-certainty illustrates how one should approach all forms of knowledge. We briefly considered the computational viewpoint in this way, trying to show that this point of view ends up contradicting itself. (Though this is not to legislate against its existence.) Such difficulties indicate the need to produce a more adequate

(1) For a more extensive treatment of sense-certainty see Cook, D.J. (1973, p.42 f.)

conception of what it is to act in an intelligent manner. This involves a development of this viewpoint.

Hegel's demand is that any form of knowledge be able to say what it knows in a way that does not contradict its own standard. This involves the detailed description of each form of knowledge on its own terms. This is the path to Science.

Conclusion

In this paper we have attempted to deal with a series of broad issues that are fundamental to the understanding of thought and its currency. We have considered, very briefly, some areas of psychology which illustrate faults in the form of knowledge they have adopted. A lot more could and needs to be said concerning these areas, and many others in the social sciences and philosophy that evince similar faults. It is hoped that enough has been said to indicate in what manner such an investigation might proceed.

Hegel's point of view was discussed in that he argues powerfully for the view that all theories or points of view must be examined in terms of how successfully they are able to achieve knowledge of their objects. Real knowledge will be arrived at, not by holding to one viewpoint in opposition to the other views, but by working through points of view to see how they contribute to our understanding of human thought. One directly practical outcome of what has been said is that psychology should recuperate its past and set to a serious study, and evaluation of Hegel's thought, his views on method, conceptualization, thinking and experience. For too long we have been dominated by a one-eyed viewpoint, it is now time to open the other eye.

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